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Solar Plexus

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Solar Plexus

The shock of jumping into a lake that thawed yesterday. Round one of any boxing match is like that: the robe comes off, and you're cold. Muscles hard, reticent. Light punches sting, make you flinch. Hard ones can knock you out. You can drown in punches in round one, punches you wouldn't even feel if they came later.

Julie Trevor had called for this, had taunted Ernesto, on television, at his fights. She took example from a young Ali. He was known then as Cassius Clay, and everybody hated him. He got his fights, though, the way he wanted them, by screaming, talking jabberwocky. She wanted Ernesto: he was old, on his second comeback, fighting bankruptcy, but not so far removed from the championship that people didn't still stop him for autographs. Blond, razor-jawed Trevor was middleweight champ, women's. Always with the women's. She had beaten men in exhibition, bums, although the judges didn't always score it that way.

She beat two guys outside a bar in Muncie or Kentucky or Detroit or Oakland. They staggered even before she took them down, one at a time, and put the second one in a chokehold. Once, while vomiting, she held two policemen at bay, by tugging and pushing at their blues, shaking the men like handkerchiefs.

Her footwork was decent, but it was her defense, a peek-a-boo style, like Floyd Patterson, that she was known for. She held her fists stationary in front of her, like a fort wall. Her head would bob out to the side or above or between the cracks in the defense, flashing, but never long enough to take a hit. From that position, offense could ignite immediately. Trevor launched punches, bone-breakers, at will. Like young Foreman, it had been years since she had to step up past the fourth round, and if she did, she'd stride through rivers of blood, not her own, on the canvas, and finish when the game got old.

Trevor wanted to fight the best. Ernesto would be a legitimizing step

toward that. He declined early and often. "I'll hit no woman. Not even a craysie one." "I need to fight legitimate fights. I'n gettin' old!" "She could be a model. A woman has serious problems to risk a face like that." Trevor got money for the fight from everywhere: the I87, who were moving in on Italian mob holdings, using any means, including fixing women's fights and establishing non-sanctioned prizes; a group called the Guerrilla Girls; the National Rifle Association (Trevor was a member and spokeswoman); even a fund established by *Ms. Magazine*. Everlast, Budweiser, AT&T, and an incredibly wealthy British promoter, Ian Burns, threw in some real money. The purse became the largest ever for a non-title fight. Any Latin honor against hitting a woman was satisfied with the promise of cash. Ernesto was in.

The first punch broke her nose. Algae clouded up in Trevor's cranial fluid. She thought she could see behind her, as if her face had come through the back of her head. Another sting came to the top of her head, in a soft spot. The ring listed, and soon, her chin was bouncing on the canvas. Her stomach hurt.

She thought she got to her feet by eight, but it was only the world that had spun so that it seemed she was vertical. The punches had made her happy, she wanted a couple more. When she made it to her corner, the crowd was making a noise like bad brakes, and she couldn't see anymore. A minute later, she breathed again. There was a bell ringing. Maybe that had been a minute ago. Maybe yesterday. She was sobering too quickly, the hum of punches thinned. She rocked the pulsar of her head back, blinking blood, needing just a couple more punches. Just two. One more, and she'd find her way, somehow, into oblivion.